

US bombs hospital amid escalating assault on Mosul

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31 December 2016

At least seven people were reported killed Thursday when a US-led coalition warplane carried out an air strike against the Ibn-Al-Athir hospital compound in Mosul. The attack came as Iraqi government troops launched what has been described as the second phase of the bloody siege of Iraq's second-largest city, which was overrun by fighters of the Islamic State (ISIS) in June of 2014.

The US command of the Pentagon's military operations in Iraq and Syria, dubbed Operation Inherent Resolve, issued a rare statement immediately acknowledging the attack on the hospital, a war crime. It claimed that the strike had been launched against a van into which ISIS fighters had been seen loading a recoilless rifle. "The van was struck in what was later determined to be a hospital compound parking lot, resulting in possible civilian casualties," the US military declared.

This marks the second time this month that the US military has acknowledged the involvement of its warplanes in attacks on a hospital in Mosul. On December 7, an air strike was launched against the Al Salem hospital complex in East Mosul, the area's main medical facility, after the attack was requested by Iraqi ground forces. The Pentagon made no mention of civilian casualties in that attack, consistent with its response to most air strikes launched by US warplanes. According to some estimates, the US military has underreported the number of Iraqis killed in its operations by a factor of 10.

Thursday's attack on the hospital came in the context of a marked escalation of the violence being unleashed on the besieged Iraqi city. Now in its third month, the offensive to retake Mosul from ISIS has been bogged down, with scant progress and heavy casualties for the US-trained Iraqi Counter Terrorism Forces that have

borne the brunt of the fighting. The past two weeks have seen a so-called "pause" or "operational refit" to allow the battered Iraqi forces to prepare for a resumption of their assault. Federal police units have been called up from Baghdad and other areas to the south to strengthen the government's depleted forces.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported Friday that Iraqi government forces have begun shelling densely populated parts of the city. The newspaper wrote: "Iraq's military has begun using heavy artillery in the crowded city, in spite of the risk to civilians." The *Journal* cited the commander of the Iraqi forces, Lt. Gen. Abdel Ghani al-Assadi, as saying that "his units have begun using artillery in eastern Mosul for the first time, after the government dropped its initial objections when the offensive bogged down."

The US-backed Iraqi siege has been staggered by the fierce resistance mounted by ISIS, which in some cases has retaken areas previously captured by government forces. At present, the Iraqi troops hold only one half of eastern Mosul, while on the other side of the Tigris river, which bisects the city, ISIS remains in control of far more populous and crowded western Mosul. The US-led coalition has bombed out all of the bridges connecting the two sides of the city.

Previously, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi predicted that the government would retake Mosul by the end of this year. Earlier this week, he revised his prediction, saying that the siege would take another three months to complete. Many believe that this is once again an overly optimistic estimate.

Lt. Gen. Stephen Townsend, the commander of US operations in Iraq and Syria, has estimated that it will take another two years to clear ISIS out of both Mosul and the Iraqi city of Raqqa and defeat what remains of its fighters in the region. Some 5,000 US troops have

been deployed in Iraq. That number is expected to rise, and it is anticipated that those on the ground will be embedded more closely with the Iraqi security forces.

Part of the problem facing the US and the Iraqi military is that ISIS has significant roots in Mosul, a predominantly Sunni city whose population was largely hostile to the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad. Even before the Islamist militia swept into the city in 2014, leading the US-trained security forces to desert en masse, ISIS operated openly in some areas of the city. Its strength is a legacy of the bitter sectarian conflicts that were sparked by the US invasion of 2003 and the subsequent utilization of divide-and-rule tactics by the US occupation.

Iraqi government troops have come under fire in areas that they have supposedly retaken, fueling suspicion that ISIS fighters have melted into the local population. This in turn has led to the imprisonment and torture of civilians suspected of sympathizing with the Islamist group.

Conditions for the civilian population, estimated at up to 1.5 million, have grown increasingly desperate as the US-backed siege has dragged on. Civilian casualties, which have soared along with the growing number of air strikes, will undoubtedly increase even more rapidly with the use of artillery against the city's crowded neighborhoods.

According to Iraqi government estimates, at least 125,000 people have fled Mosul, with over 10,000 displaced in the last week alone.

Those remaining in the city are without electricity and clean water and face the threat of starvation as food stocks run out. Sewage is running in the streets and garbage piling up uncollected, creating the conditions for outbreaks of disease. Temperatures in Mosul are now falling towards the freezing point, under conditions where there are no means to heat homes.

"Civilians in Mosul face a stark choice. If they stay, they risk hunger and being caught in the crossfire. If they flee, they risk being killed by snipers or landmines," Bruno Geddo, the representative of the UNHCR, the UN's refugee agency, said Thursday.

The US and other Western media, which only weeks ago were waging a hysterical propaganda campaign decrying a "massacre" and even "genocide" in the Syrian city of Aleppo, little more than 300 miles to the west, have for the most part treated the humanitarian

catastrophe unfolding in Mosul with silence and indifference.

The stark contrast in the approach to the Russian-backed siege of eastern Aleppo by Syrian government troops and allied militias, on the one hand, and the US-backed siege of Mosul, on the other, is clearly rooted in the geostrategic interests of US imperialism, which the media faithfully serves.

The defeat of the Al Qaeda-linked militias in Aleppo represented a devastating blow to the US-backed war for regime change in Syria—and therefore was portrayed as a war crime. The death and suffering being inflicted on the population of Mosul, on the other hand, is in the service of the same essential aims that underlay the US war launched against Iraq nearly 14 years ago: the assertion of Washington's hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East.



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